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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the role of the Japanese language in the English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classroom in Japan presents several arguments in favor of using Japanese, followed by some notes of caution and a call to teachers to reflect on their classroom language use. Arguments for using students' native language (L1) include these: in mixed level classes, less advanced students can be easily left behind if only the second language (L2) is used; the L1 can provide a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, sentence structure, and confidence; when an ESL writing topic is originally acquired in the L1, its use supports student planning; L1 can assist lower-level students in generating ideas that can then provide fuel for further oral or written language use; providing meaning for new vocabulary through translation has advantages over inductive approaches, particularly in acquiring abstract concepts; translation of whole passages can make relatively difficult texts comprehensible; and L1 use can save time and have a positive effect on the teacher-student relationship. Teachers are cautioned not to let the L1 dominate or persist in classroom communication, and to consider carefully their reasons for glossing any English word in Japanese. (Contains 23 references.) (MSE)

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Use of Japanese in the EFL Classroom: Which Way to Go?

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Use of Japanese in the EFL Classroom: Which Way to Go?

Ken Schmidt—Sendai Shirayuri Gakuen

An English class at a Sendai area high school is coming to an end. The bell rings.

Teacher: OK, everyone, good job today. とてもよかったです。Remember, your homework is due in two weeks. 再来週ね。See you later.

Student: 先生, how do you say お大事に in English?

Teacher: I think you say, "Take care."

Student: Thank you. Bye-bye. *Take care!*

Teacher: You, too. Bye.

Leaving the classroom, the instructor wonders... "Is this really an English class? If it is, there seems to be an awful lot of Japanese being spoken." I have occasionally had similar thoughts about my own classes and suspect that numerous Japanese and native speaker (NS) teachers have as well. Auerbach (1993) reports that many instructors feel that classroom use of their students' first language (L1) is sometimes unavoidable, but regrettable. Looking around the TESOL world, grammar translation is widely discredited (Auerbach, 1993; Brown & Yamashita, 1995) and direct/"English-only" methods dominate perceptions of "modern" ESL/EFL pedagogy (Izumi, 1995). Articles regularly appear with helpful ideas on how to limit or prevent L1 use (Busch, 1994; Weinberg, 1990). Despite this, many NSs make use of Japanese in their classrooms and many Japanese instructors communicate mostly in Japanese in theirs (Hino, 1988). But is this necessarily bad? In this article I will outline several arguments in favor of L1 use, followed by some notes of caution and a call to reflect on our own use of language in the classroom.

Arguments for the use of the L1

Although the use of students' L1 in EFL has a long history, the communicative language teaching movement (applied to all the skill areas—not only speaking/listening) has, to a large extent, been associated with monolingual methodology (Howatt, 1984). Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985)—stressing the importance of comprehensible, I+1, second/foreign language (L2) input for acquisition—has had a particularly strong effect in justifying the use of direct methods (Izumi, 1995). (Note: "I+1" input is input set at a slightly higher level than the current competence of the learner. It is thus comprehensible, but also provides new data for hypothesis formation and testing leading to acquisition.) Auerbach (1993), writing in an ESL context, frames the common argument in these terms:

> The more students are exposed to English, the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it and begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it... No alternative except the complete exclusion of the L1 from the ESL classroom is seen as valid. (p. 14–15)

While in no way recommending a move toward dominant use of the L1 in the classroom, Izumi (1995) and Auerbach (1993) argue that such an inflexible, English-only posture is based on inconclusive evidence and untested assumptions. They go on to cite numerous reports on the utility of the L1 and even the advantages it can bring in certain situations. Some examples with discussion are offered below:

- In mixed level classes, lower level students can easily be left behind. If only the L2 is allowed, they may frequently miss out on explanations and instructions and can become discouraged (Klassen, 1991). A more flexible approach allows the teacher and/or fellow students to occasionally use the L1 to check on understanding and help struggling students follow along.

  In a recent peer-administered survey at Shirayuri Gakuen, a majority of my second year high school students also supported occasional use of the L1, stating that one of the strengths of their Japanese teachers of English was their ability to explain—in Japanese—complicated grammar and usage points that might have been difficult to understand coming from a NS instructor.

- Shamash (1990) reports success with an approach in which learners begin by writing about their lives in their L1, or a mix of the L1 and English. These accounts are then translated into English by teachers or volunteers and provide "a natural bridge for overcoming problems of vocabulary, sentence structure and language confidence" (p. 72). Starting with the L1 in this way seems to provides security for learners, validates their life experiences (allowing them to feel like competent adults, even though they are beginners in the L2), and provides "meaningful written material to work with" (p. 75).

- Similarly, Friedlander's (1990) research provides support for using the L1 in planning ESL writing when knowledge of the topic has originally been acquired in the L1.

- Piasecka (1988) also points to the utility of the L1 for lower level students in generating ideas which can then provide fuel for conversation, writing, or specific language work in the L2:

  > Teaching bilingually does not mean a return to the Grammar Translation method, but rather a standpoint which accepts that the thinking, feeling, and artistic life of a person is very much rooted in their mother tongue. If the communicative approach is to live up to its name, then there are many occasions in which the original impulse to speak can only be found in the mother tongue...When having a conversation, we often become fully aware of what we actually mean only after speaking. We need to speak in order to sort out our ideas, and when learning a new language, this is often best done through the mother tongue. (p. 97)

I am sure that secondary school students, as well, know the frustration of wanting to express their thoughts and experiences, but not having the language to do it. Periodic brainstorming/introductory activities in Japanese might yield fruit in the form of greater motivation and better developed final products in English.

- Besides being a help in motivation and idea generation, the L1 can "serve as one of the inputs into the process of hypothesis generation" (Ellis, 1985, p. 37). Initially, a Japanese translation may be the main component in a learner's concept of a particular English word or phrase. But as s/he progresses and gains extensive exposure to English, the Japanese translation should become less and less central as English-based associations are added. Thus, giving Japanese translations for new vocabulary need not be a barrier to fluent use in English, provided the learner subsequently meets the items frequently in English language contexts.

- Indeed, providing meaning for new vocabulary through translation has some advantages over inductive approaches (i.e., using pictures, gestures, context, or L2 examples) (Sheen, 1993). Translations can be particularly helpful in quickly and clearly explaining abstract concepts (e.g., justice= 正義, the truth=事実) and although translations can yield inexact usage equivalents which may lead to misunderstandings (e.g., love=愛: ピザを愛しています??), many others fit quite nicely (e.g., sky=空, bicycle=自転車) (Izumi, 1995).

- Beyond word-level translation, translation of whole passages, can serve in making relatively difficult texts comprehensible and available as I+1 input for acquisition (Izumi, 1995). Izumi is not, however, advocating a grammar-translation method in which *students* do the translating. L1 translations are *given* to students before they read the texts in English as a means of providing meaning and helping make input comprehensible. Rather than L1 translations, Krashen (1994) would argue for providing graded input at appropriate, I+1, levels—input that is comprehensible without the help of translation. Unfortunately, the difficulty level of English texts on Japanese college entrance exams (ranging from NS eighth grade to third-year university level), effectively requires that students work with more difficult texts than their instructors might otherwise like (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). Perhaps a partial answer lies in doing both—intensive work with relatively difficult texts (translations provided) and extensive reading at I+1 levels.

Regarding translation as a task for students, Brown and Yamashita (1995) point out that in English speaking countries and the general European community, translation is seen as a special skill taught for professional purposes to those who have achieved high levels of competence in both the L1 and L2. They go on to argue that "translation is probably too

difficult, demanding, and specialized a skill to require of students who have only studied a language through junior and senior high school" (p. 24). An *over-* reliance on translation tasks can also negatively affect attitudes toward L2 reading and hinder fluent performance in reading and conversation (Bamford, 1993; Izumi, 1995). Again, however, many college entrance examinations, especially those of public universities, have extensive translation sections (Brown & Yamashita, 1995). As long as these remain, high school English departments must offer training in translation or risk being considered irrelevant by students preparing for the exams.

- Katchen (1990), writing on his teaching experience in China, agrees that use of the learners' L1 can aid understanding and save time. He also observes its positive effect on teacher-student rapport. A NS colleague of mine strongly concurs, reporting that his effectiveness in the classroom and relations with students have improved steadily as his Japanese ability has grown (Leachtenauer, 1996). Particularly outside of class, students who would never approach him in English can ask questions and chat in Japanese. Beyond making students more comfortable with him on a personal basis, conversing in Japanese helps his students understand that foreigners can learn Japanese and that international communication can involve any language.

A few notes of caution

As we have seen, there are numerous reasons—affective, linguistic, and practical in nature—to at least consider the use of Japanese in specific situations and for specific purposes in our EFL classes. However, before we go off to plan our next English lesson entirely in Japanese, I would like to offer several reasons for caution.

- The first returns us to the issue of input. Although a number of the studies cited here point to the potential of the L1 as a resource in the language classroom, none suggest that the L1 become the dominant classroom language. Extensive, comprehensible input in English is still seen as vital to language acquisition (Krashen, 1994) and it seems logical in planning lessons to try to maximize the input students get through the materials being used (texts, tapes, videos, etc.) and through communication (written and/or oral) with the instructor and fellow classmates. This may be particularly true in an EFL setting like Japan—in which learners may get relatively little input outside of class (Richard-Amato, 1988).

- An example of the preceding point regards commonly used classroom language. In the early stages of a new, low level class—e.g., first year junior high—I often find myself glossing a considerable amount of classroom language in Japanese, e.g., "Please do your workbook through page twelve. 十二ページまでね。"; "In this activity, you can ask about anything you like. Anything is ok. 何でもいい。" I tend not to worry about this very much, particularly in light of Ellis' (1985) comments on the potential for the L1 as useful input for hypothesis

testing. However, at the end of the term, how many of these common classroom phrases am I still saying in Japanese? For those that I am, it is questionable if the Japanese translation is diminishing in importance in my students' minds as Ellis hopes. My goal should be to wean my students from dependence on translation and get to the point where they are understanding common utterances directly in English. I can think of no strong reason, in *any* English classroom, to continue repeating the same commands, requests, and information day after day in Japanese rather than English.

- In addition to common utterances, we need to examine our reasons for glossing any English word in Japanese. While Izumi (1995) points out the efficiency and accuracy of translation as a means of providing meaning, by the same token, it is frequently just as easy and accurate to remain in the L2 and provide meaning through gesture, picture, context, example, or definition. In my case, missed opportunities of this type can usually be traced to a lack of pre-class planning. Realizing that we have to live within time constraints, we should look to do what we can in providing meaning via the L2 in clear, efficient, and stimulating ways.

- Another reason to be careful of excessive dependence on translation is the danger of students tuning out one's English all together. If my student's realize that I will supply a Japanese translation for anything they don't understand in English, where is their motivation to listen to my English at all? If they don't attend to my English speech, my students miss valuable chances for comprehensible input.

- For classes in which translation is the main activity, there may be particular reason for caution. Besides the potential attitudinal and performance difficulties mentioned above, Brown and Yamashita (1995) state that the longevity of grammar-translation as an approach in Japanese EFL seems to entail a "conviction that 'meaning' is expressible only in the L1" (p. 28). If we first look at a Japanese text, and then try—just for interest's sake—to see how it would be constructed in English, or if we look at an English passage and set out to see how that idea would *really* be expressed in Japanese, we may be building in our students the idea that meaning must always pass through their L1 before it has truly been grasped. Additionally, if students only write papers to be corrected, not read or discussed, they might easily perceive English as more a subject to be studied than as a real means of communication (Wachs, 1993). Translation-based classes don't have to fall victim to this difficulty, but vigilance and an emphasis on meaning would seem to be required.

- My final caution involves the sense of failure or hopelessness that we can unwittingly give to our students through our use of Japanese. In my conversation classes, I am always telling my students that they "can do it!" I challenge them to speak as much English as possible, and during some activities I require only English, so they will see that if they are creative and try, they actually can accomplish something; they really can communicate in English.

What happens to that impression, however, when I decide that they won't be able to understand what I want to say and I switch to Japanese? Am I effectively telling them, "I told you that you could do it, but actually, I don't think you're good enough yet for me to waste my time trying?" Shouldn't I, at least during certain parts of the lesson, make the same effort to communicate in English that I ask of my students?

For Japanese teachers of English, I believe a related, but somewhat different factor can come into play. For many of our students, their Japanese teachers are the most advanced L2 learners of English they will ever meet. If these instructors offer no evidence of having even basic communicative competence in English, what hope can our students be expected to hold for themselves? Knight (1995) reported that a major reason for many Japanese high school teachers' reticence to use English communicatively in class was their lack of confidence in their own English abilities. But Knight observed that teachers in his training program were at a level far beyond that needed to teach Oral Communication. I too have been greatly impressed with the English competence of my Japanese colleagues and hope they will feel free to inspire their students and make enjoyable use of these abilities in class.

Toward this end, Matsuka (1995), speaking at an ETAPS meeting, made a number of very practical suggestions for using English in a communicative way (e.g., one minute story time, culture corner). Rather than demanding that everyone immediately make a complete change to English, she challenged us to start with just one thing, perhaps a simple one-minute talk about such things as our weekend, the strange dish we had for dinner last night, or a letter from a friend in Canada. She encouraged us to do what we can to help our students see English as a living language that real people like them use to chat, to correspond, to laugh, to complain, and to learn about their world. Her words strongly reminded me of a passage from Kelley (1993):

> It is not uncommon for Japanese to speak of one special teacher that they will forever carry in their heart. And always, their words portray a teacher of life rather than of a subject, one who gifted them with humanity. (p. 187)

It is our pleasure and challenge to help our students discover this humanity through English, among the vast community of peoples and cultures (including Japanese) who use it.

Conclusion

In summary, I would like to quote again from Auerbach (1993): "Although practitioners rarely advocate the indiscriminate use of the L1, they do report finding the selective and targeted integration of the L1 useful" (p. 21). In this article, I have presented a number of ideas supporting the use of Japanese in secondary school EFL classrooms in Japan. At the same time, I have offered several notes of caution—the central point being the importance of making conscious, reasoned decisions about which language we use, and which language we

encourage our students to use at various points in our lessons and in the learning process as a whole. By carefully considering language use in our classrooms (e.g., via video/audio recording, peer observation, and after-class reflection) and considering the reports and experiences of others in the profession, we can make informed decisions that should yield benefits for our students.

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